Three-Way Shuffle Launches Congressional Races in South-Central Florida

By: Kenric Ward | Posted: February 3, 2012 3:55 AM

Republicans could go three-for-three this fall in a trio of newly drawn congressional districts in South Florida, but Democrats contend that their chances improved there under reapportionment.

The Florida Legislature kicked off a round of musical chairs when it created the sprawling 17th Congressional District to encompass portions of eight counties surrounding Lake Okeechobee.

In short order, Rep. Tom Rooney, R-Tequesta, announced he would shift from his coastal district to the new CD 17. That opened his newly numbered CD 18 for Rep. Allen West, R-Plantation, to move up I-95 from his neighboring district to the south.

Then, completing the GOP trifecta, Adam Hasner jettisoned his U.S. Senate campaign to run in West's remade district.

Will this three-way parlay pay off?

"If anything, it brings another seat into play for Democrats. We feel confident about the new 18th District," said Steve Schale, a Democratic strategist.

Celeste Bush, chairwoman of the St. Lucie County Democratic Party, is also bullish.

"Allen West is beatable. The Treasure Coast [which constitutes a large chunk of CD 18] is laid back. We don't cotton well to his right-wing extremist rhetoric," Bush said.

So far, however, no Democrat has officially stepped up to challenge West, a retired Army lieutenant colonel who is completing his first term in Congress.
The shifting district lines are not etched in stone yet. After legislative approval, the redistricting maps will face administrative review and, in all probability, court challenges.

But assuming the three district boundaries survive as drawn, here are some likely scenarios:

**CD 22:** West faced a difficult re-election campaign in a district that turned decidedly more Democratic with reapportionment -- and that got the dominoes tumbling.

Two well-funded Democrats -- former West Palm Beach Mayor Lois Frankel and Broward County businessman Patrick Murphy -- had already announced their intention to challenge West. And with national Democrats eager to take down an outspoken tea party favorite, his eventual opponent could count on a lot of help from outside.

Now, with Hasner in the race, Republicans feel that they can be more competitive. The Delray Beach resident already lives in the district, which encompasses virtually all of the Florida House district he represented for four terms.

And Hasner's being Jewish doesn't hurt in a district with a large percentage of Jewish voters.

GOP sources expect Hasner, despite his late entry into the contest, will have a unified party behind him. "He would eat any primary opponent for lunch," said one Republican familiar with the district.

But Kevin Wagner, political science professor at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, isn't so sure about Hasner's chances in the fall.

"Hasner clearly has the toughest potential electorate [of the three Republicans]," Wagner said.

Said Hasner: "I won my first race by knocking on over 10,000 doors, taking my grassroots message to the most Democratic precincts in a blue county. I'm ready to do it again."

**CD 18:** The coastal district -- spanning northern Palm Beach, Martin and St. Lucie counties -- is slightly more Republican than West's current district. But it's less red than it was under Rooney, and Democrats figure West can be beaten here.

"We will field somebody," Bush vowed.

David Lutrin, a Palm Beach County teacher who challenged fellow Democrat Tim Mahoney, announced before the West-Rooney switch that he would seek the seat.

Possible Democratic contenders from St. Lucie County -- Sheriff Ken Mascara, County Commissioner Chris Craft and former state Rep. Adam Fetterman -- reportedly are not
interested. School Board member Kathryn Hensley said she has not decided.

Bush predicts that whoever steps up will be more mainstream than West.

"He makes Tom Rooney look like Dennis Kucinich," she said, referencing the far-left Democratic congressman from Ohio.

West appears to have the GOP field safely to himself, says Allen Miller, Republican state committeeman from St. Lucie County.

"We do understand [West] is a little more outgoing than Tom [Rooney] was, which will take some getting used to, but he has been in touch with the key players, introducing himself personally in all three new counties," Miller said.

"The grassroots supporters are excited."

Michael Hofstee, a member of the St. Lucie County Republican Executive Committee, said, "West has the campaign cash and momentum. I believe he would be hard to beat, especially when you look at the fact that he beat a Democrat incumbent last time around. He's a real superstar."

West spokeswoman Angela Melvin, who said the congressman played "no role in effecting" the CD shuffle, stated that he is looking forward to representing CD 18.

"His values are aligned with the people of CD 18. He will bring a prominent voice to the needs of the Treasure Coast. He will be living on the Treasure Coast and his daughter will be in high school there."

"Representative West will be closely connected to the needs of the community. He will work hard to bring more jobs to the area, get the foreclosure market under control and make sure the inlets and waterways are a main focus of federal concern," Melvin said.

**CD 17:** A new district assembled from the interior edges of existing congressional districts, CD 17 was Rooney's for the taking, says Wagner.

"He appears to have the most advantageous district as it is very strongly Republican," the professor told Sunshine State News.

Indeed, CD 17 is the designated new "GOP" district that was originally ticketed to be centered in The Villages retirement community, northwest of Orlando.

Rooney talked up his move to CD 17, which contains many rural counties that lay within his current district:

"Congressional District 17 will be the largest agricultural district in Florida and one of the largest in the country, and the farmers here are among the nation’s leaders in beef and
dairy production.

"As a member of the House Agriculture Committee, and the chairman of the Subcommittee on Livestock, Dairy and Poultry, I will continue to be a strong voice for the people of this district," the two-term congressman said.

But Rooney will have to contend with at least one primary opponent -- Joe Arnold, a school board member in Okeechobee County.

Arnold, who calls Rooney a personal friend, said he disagrees with the congressman on the formation of the supercommittee and says he would be a stronger budget hawk.

Rooney said Thursday that he and his family plan to move to Charlotte County, home to nearly half the population of the new district.